

Ensuring Teacher Retention in a PDS

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Ensuring Teacher Retention in a PDS

Professional Development Schools, by definition, provide for the professional development of their faculty. It is therefore important to understand how professional development is conceptualized by teachers who commit their professional expertise to creating a successful and effective Professional Development School (PDS) setting. This study examines how teachers express their professional development needs and expectations and how their multiple needs are met and supported within the PDS setting. Teacher voice is our primary focus. We view professional development from a socio-communicative perspective (Bleicher, 1998). This perspective is founded on the tenet that it is the people not the place or structure that makes it work, yet the place and structure must allow and support professional development in multiple manifestations. This supposes collaborative environments. However, collaboration does not occur by putting people together in a room to accomplish common tasks but calls for the initiation of supporting organizational structures and a personal willingness for collaboration to succeed. Our research is informed by the research literature on Professional Development Schools, professional learning communities, and collaboration.

Literature Review

Professional Development Schools

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) outlines five characteristics that distinguish and define a Professional Development School (PDS). A PDS is responsible for upholding professional standards for teaching and learning. It prepares professionals to meet the needs of diverse learners. PDS partners are distinguished by the unique environment created to support a professional learning community. This includes fostering collaborative relationships that share responsibility across institutional boundaries. The PDS infrastructure should be crafted so that it utilizes supporting structures, resources and roles to achieve the collaborative goals of a professional learning community.

NCATE outlines four pillars (functions) of PDS partnerships: candidate preparation; faculty development; student learning; and inquiry. These four pillars should be regarded as integrated and the integration results in the definition of PDS work. Research indicates that inquiry is often the pillar that gets the least attention. Inquiry is the process through which professional development and student learning are integrated. Further, NCATE considers that another aspect of inquiry is to help define the professional development agenda at a PDS. All of this rests on the supposition that learning takes place most effectively within the context of real world practice. Learning

through inquiry extends to the professional learning that PDS faculty acquire as they examine and share their own practice.

The role of Professional Development in the PDS Model. For more than twenty years teacher's professional development has been credited as a central element in the success of PDSs. The Holmes Group's (1995) model of a Professional Development School (PDS) evolved from an institution that focused on initial and continuing education and research to a state or district supported school that supports six criteria set forth by the Holmes Group. The design of professional development schools should promote significant teaching and learning, create learning communities for students, and serve a diverse population of children. Furthermore, a PDS should forge innovative partnerships between K- 12 schools and higher education, promote the professional development of educators; and engage in inquiry about teaching and learning. In keeping with this model, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) describes the PDS as an innovative partnership institution that promotes both student and teacher learning. A PDS serves the same function for teacher candidates and in-service faculty and, by doing so, creates opportunity to reform education. In order to achieve this notion of education reform that focuses on both student and teacher learning and development, professional learning community models have been effectively adapted to PDS settings.

Professional Learning Community

The professional learning community model assumes a collaborative workplace wherein the work of teaching and learning along with decision making is a venture that all stakeholders share. The goal is to raise the collective ability of the community to improve the learning of students. A professional learning community (PLC) is characterized by Eaker and DuFour (2002) as an "environment fostering mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth, and a synergy of efforts" as a way to transform a school. A learning community is the core of a PDS. A PDS is "a learning-centered community that supports the integrated learning and development of P-12 students, candidates, and PDS partners through inquiry-based practice ... (which) results in improvements in the practice of individuals and of the partnering institutions" (NCATE, 2001, p. 9).

While the beneficial aspects of learning communities are well documented, there is little information to provide guidance in creating and developing professional learning communities (Hord, 2004). In part, this is because the development of learning communities is contingent upon the goals and available resources of the school. Once these are determined, there are an abundance of suggestions and ideas of approaches based on the documentation of experiences of other institutions that may lead to the invention of such communities (Boyd & Hord, 1994; Floden, Goertz, & O'Day, 1995; Kruse & Louis, 1995). What emerges from these examples is that creating a learning community environment requires hard work. It demands intense commitment and persistence. Establishing a PLC is a cultural shift for a school. It is a new way for teachers to work in order to refocus attention to learning rather than teaching, both for teachers and students. It requires collaboration that enables PLC members to attain and

sustain focus and self-accountability. The key is how to establish effective collaboration.

Collaboration

Educational growth for teachers is likely to be optimized when there is support from other professionals (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Sarason, 2002; Sarason & Lorenz, 1998). Building a learning community calls for teachers to collaborate as active participants who exercise professional influence in the decision making process. John-Steiner, Weber, and Minnis (1998) offered a definition of collaboration in a PDS setting: “a true collaboration represent(s) complementary domains of expertise.... there is a commitment to shared resources, power, and talent: no individual’s point of view dominates, authority for decisions and actions resides in the group, and work products reflect a blending of all participant’ contributions” (p. 776). We contend that, because of the multiple responsibilities faced by teachers, collaboration can be burdensome unless participants’ values, common objectives, and shared work are considered in addition to engaging in dialogue. However, Long (2004) reports that the structures which support long-term professional partnerships are not commonly evident in K-12 settings. Research has found that one of the key elements that must be included in K-12 settings is scheduled time during the day for teams of teachers to engage in collegial meetings (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

This current study picks up with this theme of nurturing collaboration as a foundation to establishing a healthy professional learning community. The purpose of our study was to examine how teachers defined collaboration in a PDS that has already established some degree of success among stakeholders.

Context of the Study- GWS Unique PDS Features

In 2002, both George Washington School (GWS), a pseudonym for the actual school in this study, a K - 5 public charter school, and its partner Teachers University (TU), a pseudonym for the actual university in this study opened to students. Bringing a new public university campus to the region and proposing a charter school PDS was strongly supported by the County Superintendent of Schools and the county’s 23 school district superintendents. In Fall 2006 GWS began to build out to include a Middle School. It offers a dual language/language enrichment program to 670 students who are organized in multi-age, team taught clusters. In its charter, GWS described its mission in terms of a professional development school.

GWS hosts an exemplary continued professional development and research environment in which teachers, student teachers, and University faculty collaborate to develop learning experiences, strategies and activities to benefit all children. Opportunity to participate in high-level professional development and research opportunities is very attractive, causing a competitive application process for faculty who come from several of the County’s school districts with three or more years leave of absence, allowing them to maintain their seniority, salary, and benefits. For those who stay for their entire tenure, teachers return to their districts with a greatly enhanced repertoire of skills, experiences, and knowledge.

Students are taught in multi-age clusters that loop in a two year cycle and support a developmentally appropriate environment where students can move freely as their program and skill needs change. The children participate in a variety of fine arts programs including music, art, drama, and band as well as enrichment classes in literature, culture, agriculture, and sculpture. Multilingualism is a key component in our educational philosophy. Some students are in dual language classes, a 50/50 model focusing on biliteracy, while others are in a language enrichment strand receiving approximately 1 ½ hours of Spanish a week, focusing on conversational skills. The current 2006 student demographics reflect the local county region. There are 55% Hispanic, 22% English learners, 38% socio-economically disadvantaged, 5% migrant, and 10% special education students at GWS.

Methodology

Design

In line with the theory-building orientation of this research, an interpretive design (Erickson, 1998, 1986) was implemented. Interpretive research analyzes actions from the participant's (emic) point of view. This approach was chosen since only the participants themselves could communicate their perceptions of what professional development was from their unique perspectives and why it was working well for them at GWS. The researcher, in the role of a participant observer (author 1) could then triangulate her direct observations and interpretations of participants in various professional development contexts at GWS, both formal and informal.

Participants

The 25 participants in this study were teachers at GWS, a professional development school in Southern California with a total faculty of 30. The data were collected over a two semester period during the normal academic school year. Author 1 was also able to draw upon her 5 year formal position as the University Liaison at GWS since its founding. As such she was able to assume a participant observer role in this study.

Data Collection

Initially, teachers were interviewed in 4 groups. These groups normally met at ACT (Active Collaborative Team) time. Other data sources were the fieldnotes of the participant observer and discussions among the researchers that triangulated with the teacher interview data.

Analysis

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) techniques were used to negotiate meaning and develop explanatory models. Interview data were analyzed for emergent themes about both how participants were defining professional development as well as what aspects had been successful for them personally. Several methods were employed to insure quality and trustworthiness in data collection, analysis and reporting. The researcher in the role of participant observer allowed for continuous data collection and prolonged engagement in the field (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The research team, a

combination of university and PDS members, engaged in critical discussions about the findings and possible interpretations.

Results and Discussion

The Challenge

Opportunity to work at the school is attractive and competitive. But the appointment brings challenges: to create culture, build collaborative teams, provide innovative curriculum in a dual language setting, craft professional development and meet the myriad demands of a PDS – all in an environment of constant teacher turnover. Some faculty are stimulated by the complexity and seek solutions to the constant challenges (Bolman & Deal, 2002). Others find the setting too complex and the challenges a constant strain and leave during their period of tenure compounding the dilemma of teacher turnover.

Professional Development Activities

Several formal professional development events and settings were offered to support professional development at GWS. We classify them as external if they took place off the GWS campus and were organized by people outside the faculty and internal if they took place on the campus and were organized by GWS faculty. Teachers indicated that the internal events were most valued. In fact, the whole range of professional development activities at GWS were so embedded in the everyday work life of the teachers that the GWS teachers often talked about professional development being everything they did at the school. This was often referred to as professional development-in-action. The components of professional development-in-action were Active Collaborative Teams, Councils, and Classroom visits.

ACT

ACT is an acronym for Active Collaborative Team which was an hour a day, three times a week set aside for teachers to meet in grade level teams. This was a key event for building community in the smaller grade level groups. In order to allow for this time, the principal had organized for content area specialists to take classes so that the teachers could meet during the regular school day hours on these three days. Teachers expressed the following as attributes and benefits of ACT time:

- Decide priorities for each team
- Set agendas
- Align parallel programs
- Focus on student needs
- Enrich knowledge and skills
- Enhance collaboration
- Achieve induction at team level
- Value expertise and resources
- Develop curriculum

Councils

Councils were twice a month events that allowed teachers to meet in larger across-grade level groups to work on school wide areas of concern as well as for small group professional development. The time required to allow for Council meetings was gained through banked time from shortened break times and other time saving devices that allowed students to be dismissed earlier on each Thursday of the week so that Councils could take place. Teachers expressed the following as attributes and benefits of Councils:

- Create a common vision
- Build cross grade collaboration
- Facilitate shared decision making
- Ensure authentic professional development experiences
- Develop common history and culture

Classroom Visits

Classroom visits include the following three elements: (1) visiting peer classrooms to either observe and discuss one another's practice; (2) student teachers and other university preservice teachers entering the classroom as interns; and (3) visits from others such as university professors, parents, and other community members. This area provided opportunities for teachers to integrate their knowledge and apply it in the classroom setting. It was the area that gave meaning to the notion that teaching at the GWS PDS was like having professional development experiences all day long.

Outside of the internal embedded professional development, teachers attended many conferences, workshops, and institutes. Teachers also shared research implementation with peers. As a context for understanding some of the benefits that teachers felt they are gaining from working at a PDS in terms of professional development, it is necessary to list the successful events that they mention.

Successes

Teachers consider that there have been many events that they consider signs of school success. These included: authors' event at GWS; creation of a field placement experience flowchart; CSUCI representation on interview panels for GWS faculty; fieldtrips to the university for "student seminars"; grant writing collaborations; living museum; interview panel sessions for advanced student teachers; joint attendance at California charter school events; joint attendance at professional conferences; collaboration with liaison faculty in planning curriculum council structure; making collaborative presentations to professional organizations; middle school charter development collaboration; professors as guest speakers to GWS students; service learning projects; GWS teachers as guest speakers in credential classes. In addition, GWS prepared over 300 pre-service teachers in the past 4 years. Supporting student teachers is one of the four major pillars that NCATE defines for a PDS.

Teachers' Voice

The following are teacher quotes that give the flavor of their sense of accomplishment and personal growth resulting from participation in the embedded professional development at GWS:

- Student teachers...keep me healthy ...knowing what I'm doing
- People have open minds...willing to listen and to accept other people's ideas
- We have utter respect for one another's expertise
- We value each other so much
- Our visions come to fruition
- Other schools don't let you be this creative
- Professional development is happening all day, every day

Communication between individuals and within collaborative groups is enhanced when individuals are adept at stating their position, disclosing their needs and feelings, and offering relevant information.

Roberts & Pruitt (2003)

Benefits of Professional Development from the Teachers' Perspective

In listening to GWS teacher voices, it became evident that there were some common elements that they were using to define what they felt was meaningful professional development. GWS teachers expressed a sense of accomplishment as a school in terms of the results of participating in the embedded professional development activities. These included the notion of equity in collaboration and engaging in a shared decision making process. They pointed out that they valued the sharing of information across grade levels or phase articulation as it was often referred to since teachers taught multi-age groups, with two grades in the same classroom at a time. Teachers mentioned collaborative professional development experiences (Fetter, 2003) to cover many of the instances in which they felt that they were collaborating with other teachers for their professional development activities. They felt that their choices were honored in both their teaching and professional development. Almost all teachers stated that their content knowledge had deepened at GWS and they were much better informed about language enrichment programs. They felt that they had a more substantive cross grade collaboration and good communication had been established with all their peers in the school. This led to a sense of continuity having been facilitated making such things as induction more effective.

Conclusions and Implications

Several strategies have been implemented in order to increase teacher retention at GWS. The two year tenure at GWS is being increased to 3 years. There is a focus on

discovering individual hopes and aspirations as new teachers enter the school in order to try to match these to the professional development opportunities that are created. We are beginning to develop a fast-track induction for incoming teachers. Creation of more time for teams to teach and learn from each other is considered critical to the improvement of the professional development at GWS. There is an awareness that the whole school is responsible for facilitating an environment that encourages everybody to participate. The maintenance of structures that encourage teachers to participate in school-wide contribution is critical to success. GWS teachers are constantly redefining what the PD in PDS is all about. The newest conceptualization of professional development at GWS is PD-in-Action. This is a concept that almost everything a teacher does during the school day is related to their professional development.

The role of the principal is crucial to supporting the embedded PD model to work (Rutledge, Smith, & Watson, 2003). The following quotes give an idea as to how teachers view this aspect:

The principal is really good at making sure we get to the conferences that we think will help us.

She finds conferences that are taking place and lets us know about them.
A structure was designed to support self-governance, increase leadership capacity and reduce the potential for attrition

Administration does creative accounting to find funds for us all to go to events.

These concluding quotes indicate the degree of buy in and sense of belonging that teachers felt about their professional development opportunities at GWS:

We have one of the finest working teams
There is a real sense of community throughout the school
I don't even want to think of leaving here – what will I do
I can't go back into a regular classroom
I just can't even think about leaving next year
Hopefully, I be able to stay – forever!

GWS primarily falls within the Human Resource frame of Bolman and Deal's organizational reality.(Bolman & Deal, 1997, 2002) This type of organization is characterized by relationships, collaboration, skills, support and needs. The identified challenges are aligning organizational needs with that of human needs. Therefore, the school development plan has taken into account these needs to create a structure that is mutually supportive. The plan looks at improving collaboration skills, shared decision making and broadening school-wide relationships to bring about both student, staff and organizational success.

Adult learners need to connect new concepts to what they already know in order to make use of new ideas. They learn best when the

new concepts and skills are related to real-life circumstances. This is one reason that job-embedded staff development is so effective.

Roberts & Pruitt (2003)

Here at GWS, we are engaged in a continuing self-study aimed at defining what we are doing that is successful and why we are making certain decisions at our PDS that guide future directions for professional development as well as improvement of curriculum and student learning (Rhine, 1998). We are beginning to embrace a larger conceptualization of PDS than when we began 5 years ago. This can be thought of as a 5th pillar in the NCATE framework for effective PDS, a pillar we call dissemination. The heart of our PDS is to create a culture for making our action research public. We believe that sharing best practices in the alternative PDS setting can cast a larger net to include all schools. After all, positive effects on student attitudes, interest in school, and learning are the primary concern of all educators.

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